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The Leaked Russian Nuclear Documents and Russian First Use of Nuclear Weapons

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In February 2024, in an illuminating and alarming report, the *Financial Times* revealed, "The [Russian] classified papers, seen by the Financial Times, describe a threshold for using tactical nuclear weapons that is lower than Russia has ever publicly admitted, according to experts who reviewed and verified the documents."[1] The revelations in the article were picked up by numerous publications. Typically, Western press reporting on Russian nuclear issues involves interviewing the normal coterie of left-wing "experts" who are more interested in reducing the U.S. nuclear deterrent than understanding Russian nuclear strategy and its implications. In contrast, the *Financial Times* presented an insightful analysis concerning the meaning of the Russian documents. Still, the analysts who historically have been most accurate in their assessment of Russian nuclear weapons policy were not among them (e.g., Dr. Stephen Blank, Dr. Keith Payne, and Mr. Dave Johnson).[2]

Russian Nuclear Policy

Russian nuclear weapons policy is very dangerous; it is closely tied to military aggression and repeated high-level nuclear threats.[3] In 2015, in the time frame of the leaked Russian documents, NATO's Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg observed, "Russia's recent use of nuclear rhetoric, exercises and operations are deeply troubling… Russia's nuclear sabre-rattling is unjustified, destabilizing and dangerous."[4] Since then, the situation has clearly gotten worse.[5]

The Biden Administration's *2022 Nuclear Posture Review* also noted that:

> The Russian Federation's unprovoked and unlawful invasion of Ukraine in 2022 is a stark reminder of nuclear risk in contemporary conflict. Russia has conducted its aggression against Ukraine under a nuclear shadow characterized by irresponsible saber-rattling, out of cycle nuclear exercises, and false narratives concerning the potential use of weapons of mass destruction (WMD). In brandishing Russia's nuclear arsenal in an attempt to intimidate Ukraine and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), Russia's leaders have made clear that they view these weapons as a shield behind which to wage unjustified aggression against their neighbors. Irresponsible Russian statements and actions raise the risk of deliberate or unintended escalation.[6]

Russian nuclear doctrine is very permissive with regard to nuclear escalation. In 2023, Putin's Deputy at the Russian National Security Council (and former President) Dimitri Medvedev declared, "The Donbas (Donetsk and Luhansk) republics and other territories will be accepted into Russia….Russia has announced that not only mobilisation capabilities, but also any Russian weapons, including strategic nuclear weapons and weapons based on new principles, could be used for such protection."[7] Medvedev even threatened "the further existence of the entire human civilization" if Russia ends up defeated in Ukraine by the West.[8]

The Russian documents revealed in the *Financial Times* relate to Russian officer training and wargaming, and, as such, were never intended to be made public. This factor alone gives them great importance. The documents, dating from 2008 to 2015, according to the *Financial Times* "…summarise the [nuclear first use] threshold as a combination of factors where losses suffered by Russian forces 'would irrevocably lead to their failure to stop major enemy aggression', a 'critical situation for the state security of Russia.' Other potential conditions include the destruction of 20 per cent of Russia's strategic ballistic missile submarines, 30 per cent of its nuclear-powered attack submarines, three or more cruisers, three airfields, or a simultaneous hit on main and reserve coastal command centres."[9] The documents provide further evidence that Russia has the lowest nuclear weapons use threshold in the world.

The Leaked Russian Nuclear Documents and Russian Nuclear Doctrine

These leaked documents date from the period in which Russia was, apparently falsely, claiming publicly that it would use nuclear weapons first only in the event of "aggression against us with the use of conventional weapons that threaten the very existence of the state."[10] President Putin's June 2020 decree on Russian nuclear deterrence contained much more detailed information concerning the Russian nuclear first use threshold. Paragraph 19 of the document states:

> The conditions specifying the possibility of nuclear weapons use by the Russian Federation are as follows:
>
> a) arrival of reliable data on a launch of ballistic missiles attacking the territory of the Russian Federation and/or its allies;
>
> b) use of nuclear weapons or other types of weapons of mass destruction by an adversary against the Russian Federation and/or its allies;
>
> c) attack by [an] adversary against critical governmental or military sites of the Russian Federation, disruption of which would undermine nuclear forces response actions;
>
> d) aggression against the Russian Federation with the use of conventional weapons when the very existence of the state is in jeopardy.[11]

Each of these subparagraphs allows for the first use of nuclear weapons. Paragraph 4 of Putin's nuclear deterrence decree links Russian nuclear weapons use to "sovereignty" and "territorial integrity."[12] This is potentially very permissive. Indeed, in 2022, President Putin delivered a major speech outlining his views on Russian sovereignty which is well-worth reading.[13] It contains some amazing assertions concerning the meaning of sovereignty. Moreover, in 2024, Putin stated his war against Ukraine would result in "ensuring the country's [Russia's] global sovereignty."[14] A more accurate description of what Putin means might be "domination." In his February 2024 speech to the Russian Federal Assembly, President Putin threatened to use "nuclear weapons [causing] the destruction of civilization" should the West deploy troops in support of Ukraine.[15] The political role of Russian nuclear weapons is clearly coercion which is supported by Russia's low nuclear use threshold.[16]

Keep in mind that the use of the word "aggression" in the Russian formulations is meaningless in light of President Putin's ability to distort history. For example, just after the leaked documents appeared, President Putin claimed that Russia had not started his war against Ukraine.[17] As the *2022 Nuclear Posture Review* rightly observed, Russia considers nuclear weapons as a shield for its "aggression."[18]

The content of the leaked Russian documents is generally consistent with sub-paragraphs 19c and 19d of President Putin's June 2020 nuclear decree. But the specific details added by the documents clearly indicate that the planning threshold for nuclear first use is significantly more permissive than the plain meaning of the decree would suggest.



For example, "30 per cent of its nuclear-powered attack submarines, three or more cruisers, three airfields, or a simultaneous hit on main and reserve coastal command centres"[19] would be losses, but surely would *not* constitute a threat to "the very existence of the state…" Similarly, the loss of 20% of the Russian nuclear ballistic missile submarine force, again, while significant, would not be a critical loss of Russian nuclear capability, particularly when seen in the context of the rest of its strategic nuclear deterrent. The leaked documents are apparently consistent with paragraph 19c[20] of the official nuclear decree which allows nuclear strikes in response to conventional attack on almost any military facility in Russia because of the universal dual capability (nuclear and conventional) of Russian non-strategic delivery vehicles.[21]

The leaked Russian training materials display remarkably permissive assumptions concerning Russian initiation of nuclear weapons first use. The Russia first use criteria describe events and combat losses that would inevitably happen very early in any high intensity conflict. It is tantamount to assuming as a planning factor that Russia would initiate tactical nuclear weapons first use almost immediately after the outbreak of any war with NATO.

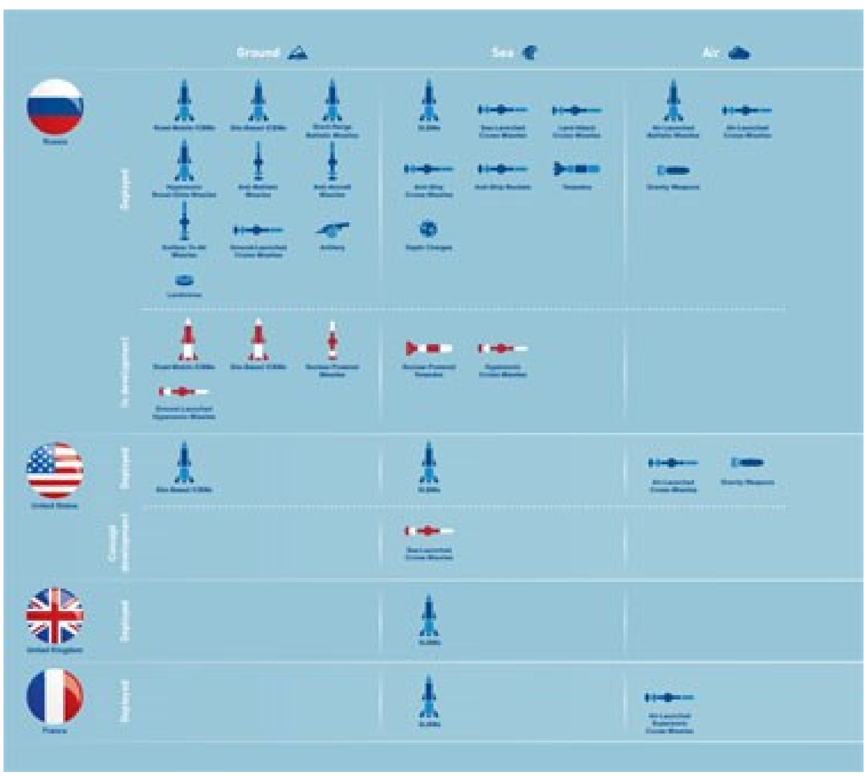
The Leaked Russian Documents and the Russian Navy

The planning assumptions in the leaked Russian documents for the use of nuclear weapons in support of the Russian Navy appear to be completely outside of Article 19 but may be partially covered by Article 4 of President Putin's nuclear deterrence decree. Naval officers, according to the leaked documents, were reportedly being trained that the criteria for nuclear first use include "…an enemy landing on Russian territory, the defeat of units responsible for securing border areas, or an imminent enemy attack using conventional weapons."[22] Again, "…an enemy landing on Russian territory" or "the defeat of units responsible for securing border areas…"[23] would not obviously constitute a threat to the very existence of Russia. Responding with nuclear weapons to "an imminent enemy attack using conventional weapons" is not covered by anything in Putin's nuclear deterrence decree. It constitutes pre-emptive nuclear war. While not in the official Russia documents, the conditions described in the documents resemble a 2008 statement by General of the Army Yuri Baluyevskiy, then-Chief of the General Staff and First Deputy Defense Minister, who said, "We do not intend to attack anyone, but we consider it necessary for all our partners in the world community to clearly understand... that to defend the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Russia and its allies, military forces will be used, including preventively, including with the use of nuclear weapons."[24] In September 2014, then-retired, Baluyevskiy stated that the "…conditions for pre-emptive nuclear strikes…is contained in classified policy documents."[25] Thus, the leaked Russian documents appear consistent with Baluyevskiy's revelation of Russian classified plans for "pre-emptive nuclear strikes." Other open source information suggests that what General Baluyevskiy said was correct.[26]

The Declining Russian Nuclear Weapon Use Threshold

Today, the Russian nuclear use threshold is likely lower than it was from 2008 to 2015. In September 2020, noted Russian journalist Pavel Felgenhauer wrote, "First, the nuclear threshold is becoming lower: in any serious skirmish, the Russian Navy would either need to go nuclear or risk being sunk."[27] Russian Navy performance in the war against Ukraine suggests he was correct.[28] The leaked documents provide more substantiation that Russia sees naval nuclear weapons as a way of "making Russia's navy 'more effective.'"[29]

Russian naval nuclear weapons policy, as ordered by President Putin in a 2017 directive, goes beyond deterrence to focus further on nuclear warfighting.[30] It stated, "Indicators of the effectiveness of measures undertaken to execute the State Policy on Naval Operations are: …the capability of the Navy to damage an enemy's fleet at a level not lower than critical with the use of non-strategic nuclear weapons."[31] This must constitute warfighting because Russia does not face a significant non-strategic naval nuclear threat from the United States and NATO. The following 2020 NATO graphic illustrates the non-strategic nuclear capability of Russia, the United States, France, and the United Kingdom.[32]



Source: The NATO Secretary General's Annual Report 2020.

There is no NATO anti-ship nuclear weapon. The French nuclear cruise missile is a land-attack missile.[33] The only conceivable weapon that could be used against ships is a nuclear bomb.

The Biden Administration has warned that Russia is lowering its nuclear weapons use threshold. The Director of National Intelligence's (DNI's) 2023 *Annual Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community* provides a stark warning about the Russian nuclear threat. It states, "Heavy losses to its ground forces and the large-scale expenditures of precision-guided munitions during the conflict have degraded Moscow's ground and air-based conventional capabilities and increased its reliance on nuclear weapons."[34] The Biden Administration's October 2022 *National Security Strategy* recognized that, "Russia's conventional military will have been weakened [as a result of its war with Ukraine], which will likely increase Moscow's reliance on nuclear weapons in its military planning."[35]

Russia's apparent increasing reliance on tactical nuclear weapons poses a serious problem for the United States and NATO. The vast reduction in the U.S. and NATO in-theater nuclear capabilities after the demise of the Soviet Union may have created a "gap" in the West's deterrence posture. As Professor Matthew Kroenig wrote in *The Wall Street Journal,* "The U.S., which lacks commensurate tactical nuclear weapons, could retaliate with one of its big ballistic missiles or strategic bombers, risking a full-scale nuclear exchange and a global holocaust. Or the U.S. could back down, losing the war and shredding the credibility of its defense commitments."[36]

Russian Nuclear Escalation and Communist China

The leaked documents also revealed Russia's assessment of a potential threat from China. While Russian nuclear war planning and wargaming against China came as a surprise to many, it should not have. While it is not politically correct in Moscow to speak about a Chinese threat to Russia, the Russian military clearly believes this is the case. However, ironically, Russia is still selling arms to China. Russia's low nuclear use threshold allows it to rationalize selling arms to China.[37] Moreover, there are press reports of Russian nuclear exercises directed against China in the time period of the leaked documents.

The Russian Vostok-2010 Far East military exercise, reportedly simulated against China, provided evidence that actual Russia nuclear policy involves a much lower nuclear use threshold than what is contained in public documents. One of a number of reports of Russian nuclear weapons simulated use in Vostok-2010 exercise appeared in the official newspaper of the Far East Military District which said, "To suppress a large center of the separatists' resistance and to achieve minimal losses of the attacking troops a low-yield 'nuclear' attack was mounted against the enemy."[38] This, again, is hardly a threat to the very existence of the Russian state which was supposed to be Russian nuclear doctrine at the time. Reportedly, during the Vostok-2014 exercise (also reportedly simulated against China[39]), "the Russian Strategic Missile Forces in the Central Military District exercised an escalation from conventional to nuclear war."[40] Noted British expert on Russia Roger McDermott, wrote that,

"Vostok 2014, much like its earlier incarnation in 2010, contains strong evidence that the Russian General Staff continues to consider China a potential threat to Russia."[41]

There is a significant difference between the criteria for Russian first use of nuclear weapons against NATO and China. According to the *Financial Times*, "The order has been given by the commander-in-chief…to use nuclear weapons…in the event the enemy deploys second-echelon units and the South [China] threatens to attack further in the direction of the main strike."[42] This is interesting because the exercise threshold of nuclear weapons use against China is obviously higher for China than against NATO. What is being described is a Russian nuclear response to a major invasion by China as distinct from a minor incursion by NATO. On the surface, the opposite should be true. In the 2008-2015 time frame, China had a much smaller nuclear weapons capability than that possessed by NATO nations. While Russia apparently believes that China has many more nuclear weapons than Western estimates, this alone does not explain the disparity in the nuclear first use threshold. [43]

The difference in Russian nuclear strategy between NATO and China likely reflects the human element in deterrence. Not all national leaderships are the same or are perceived to be the same. A key part of Russia's nuclear strategy is "escalate to de-escalate" or an "escalate to win" strategy.[44] The assumption behind this strategy is that United States and NATO have weak leadership that will not respond in-kind to Russia's introduction of nuclear weapons into the conflict.[45] In light of China's Maoist legacy of irresponsible rhetoric concerning nuclear war (willingness to accept hundreds of millions of deaths in a nuclear war), no one would make the same assumption about China. [46]

The Importance of the Leaked Russian Documents

The importance of the leaked Russian documents is that they provide more detail concerning the Russian nuclear use threshold and confirm previous reports that it is well below the publicly announced version of Russian nuclear doctrine. For example, in 2014, Russian expatriate Nikolai Sokov reported "…all large-scale military exercises that Russia conducted beginning in 2000 featured simulations of limited nuclear strikes."[47] The January 2016 report of NATO's Secretary General noted that Russia "…simulated nuclear attacks on NATO Allies (e.g., ZAPAD) and on partners (e.g., March 7 2013 simulated attacks on Sweden)…"[48] Russian nuclear exercises against non-nuclear Sweden are particularly important because Sweden, like Ukraine (against which Russian nuclear threats are frequent[49]), is not supposed to be subject to nuclear attack under Russian negative assurances[50] (i.e., Russia's pledge not to use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear states.) Yet, in March 2022, "Swedish TV4 Nyheterna has reported that Russian bombers 'armed with nuclear warheads' entered EU airspace before being intercepted by Swedish fighter jets."[51] While Russian nuclear intimidation bomber flights are common, flights by aircraft armed with nuclear weapons are much less frequent. Violation of sovereign airspace by Russian bombers is rare. Russia apparently has never before combined an overflight and carrying live nuclear weapons as reported in the Swedish incident.



Conclusion

It is clear from the leaked Russian documents and other open source information that the Russian threshold for nuclear employment is lower than previously thought and the United States cannot depend upon Russia's observance of the so-called "nuclear taboo" to protect the West from Russian nuclear attack. Moscow will employ nuclear weapons when deemed necessary to serve Russian national interests.

Only credible nuclear deterrence can safeguard the West, yet nuclear deterrence is under attack by the disarmament groups globally. The context of this is a Russian nuclear modernization program which according to Putin has already achieved 95% and will continue even after 100% is achieved.[52] Currently, the comparable U.S. strategic nuclear modernization number is zero.[53]

Despite the clear and present danger of Russian aggression and even nuclear escalation, as Dr. Keith Payne has pointed out, the Biden Administration's *2022 Nuclear Posture Review* "appears frozen in the naively-optimistic post-Cold War years; it suggests no urgency with regard to U.S. responses to mounting threats."[54] The October 2023 report of the bipartisan U.S. Strategic Posture Commission (SPC) reported that three of the four American strategic modernization programs are behind schedule.[55] By 2030, the United States will likely be forced to retire deterrent systems before their replacements can be deployed. In February 2024, STRATCOM Commander General Anthony Cotton warned that the Columbia class ballistic missile submarine "must achieve its first strategic deterrent patrol by 2030 to avoid an unacceptable capability gap."[56] A capability gap is very likely because the notional availability date for the first Columbia class submarine is 2031 and it is behind schedule.[57]

The bipartisan SPC report repeatedly emphasized the urgency with which the United States must respond to these looming nuclear threat developments. The leaked Russian documents serve to confirm the need for that urgency.

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